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Argentina
Communists

Articles

Argentina: Prospects for Leftist Terrorism

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The recent extradition from Brazil to Buenos Aires of Montonero terrorist leader Mario Firmenich has again focused public attention on the danger of a resurgence of leftist terrorism in Argentina. Terrorism by the left has been a persistent source of political instability in Argentina and has played a central role in undermining the authority of both military and civilian regimes. President Alfonsin's response to the first inklings of terrorist reorganization shows, in our view, that he understands the gravity of the threat.

We foresee little chance of a serious terrorist movement emerging over the next six months. Nevertheless, the political scene is volatile and the Alfonsin government may not be able to contain the social, economic, and political pressures that could ignite leftwing violence at a later date.

Return of the Montoneros

The Montoneros, who first emerged in the late 1960s, have long sought to convert Peronism into a movement of the revolutionary left. After Juan Peron's death in 1974, the Montoneros clashed openly with the Peronist party's conservative leadership and were expelled from the movement by his widow and successor, Isabel. The Montoneros continued to struggle for what they termed "authentic Peronism," becoming one of South America's largest, wealthiest, and most deadly terrorist groups. Nevertheless, they were crushed after the military coup of 1976. The few Montoneros who were not killed or captured by the armed forces were forced into exile, where they launched a largely ineffectual propaganda campaign against the military.

Exiled Montonero at a press conference: the movement's military ethos endures

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estimated that there were approximately 300 Montoneros in the country and some 500 abroad, although we believe these figures were somewhat inflated.

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numerous Montoneros returned to Argentina in the months following the election in October 1983 of the new civilian government. Any expected lenience from the authorities, however, did not materialize. Alfonsin, who personally abhors terrorism and needs to hold the left accountable for its crimes if he is to

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successfully prosecute the military for its excesses during the antiterrorist campaigns of the late 1970s, took a tough stance regarding the Montoneros. Two top Montonero leaders, Ricardo Obregon and Oscar Bidegain, were arrested soon after returning to Buenos Aires in December 1983, and Firmenich has remained in custody since his extradition from Brazil in October 1984. Moreover, public statements by government officials indicate that Alfonsin—despite cutbacks in military spending—intends to preserve the military's ability to monitor terrorist capabilities.

Internal Divisions

These arrests, in our view, dealt a severe blow to the Montonero movement and have hindered its efforts at reorganization. With their most experienced leaders in prison or in hiding, the Montoneros' once solid chain of command has broken down two basic currents have emerged: a relatively moderate majority faction loyal to Firmenich, and more violence-prone groups whose leadership is unclear 3.5(c)

The Firmenich faction has publicly abjured violence, asserting that the Montoneros will now concentrate on electoral politics. Before his arrest, Ricardo Obregon announced the Montoneros' dissolution as an armed force and their reconstitution as the Authentic Peronist Party. instead of forming an independent party, the Montoneros have attempted to infiltrate the regular Peronist movement's radical left wing, the Peronist Intransigence and Mobilization (IMP) faction. The IMP is headed by Peronist Senator Vicente Saadi, a well-known Montonero sympathizer whose newspaper, *La Voz*, was formerly subsidized by Montonero ransom money. We believe that the Montoneros' current goal is to gain full control of the IMP and use it to turn the entire Peronist movement toward the revolutionary left. The Montoneros are supplementing this strategy by infiltrating Peronist-controlled trade unions and rural cooperatives

We believe that the Firmenich faction's rejection of violence is a tactical maneuver and that it would return to armed struggle under more favorable circumstances. The Montoneros have pledged in the past to work for peaceful change, but they quickly reverted to violence when conditions shifted. Furthermore, members of the group are rearming and continue to train in terrorist tactics and guerrilla warfare. Recent public statements by Roberto Perdia and Fernando Vaca—the top Montonero leaders not in prison—have hinted at a resumption of violence if Alfonsin continues to "persecute" the movement.

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The immediate danger, however, stems from those Montoneros who question the leadership's cautious stance. Although not formally structured into an anti-Firmenich group and divided among themselves, these Montoneros doubt that they can ever dominate Peronism and are eager to resume violence.

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Reorganization of the ERP

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Argentina's other significant leftist terrorist group is the People's Revolutionary Army (ERP). In contrast to the vague populism espoused by the Montoneros, the ERP is rooted in Trotskyite Marxism-Leninism and has drawn inspiration more from Castro and Mao than Peron. Emerging concurrently with the Montoneros, the ERP was smaller and was concentrated in Argentina's interior provinces, where it conducted sporadic rural guerrilla warfare until the late 1970s. Like the Montoneros, the group was ravaged by the military's post-1976 crackdown. the ERP lost 85 percent of its cadre and close to 95 percent of its weapons, safehouses, and vehicles during that period

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Enrique Gorriaran Merlo

An Argentine of Basque origin, Enrique Gorriaran, about 42, is the ranking leader of the People's Revolutionary Army (ERP). A founder of the ERP in 1970, Gorriaran was arrested one year later and imprisoned in southern Argentina. In 1972 he escaped to Cuba, returning to Argentina the following year to participate in the ERP's rural guerrilla campaign. US diplomats report that, by the late 1970s, Gorriaran led the ERP's military wing, which attacked businessmen and labor leaders and assassinated police and military personnel. He fled the country following the 1976 military coup and resurfaced in Nicaragua, fighting alongside the Sandinistas. Gorriaran led the hit team that assassinated former Nicaraguan ruler Somoza in Paraguay in 1980, [redacted] *. He currently lives in Managua.* [redacted]

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Mario Eduardo Firmenich

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Mario Firmenich, 36, is on trial in Buenos Aires for kidnaping and homicide. A founder of the Montoneros, Firmenich gained notoriety in the early 1970s for his involvement in two bold terrorist acts: the kidnap/murder of former Argentine President Pedro Aramburu and the kidnaping of two Argentine businessmen, which resulted in a record $60 million ransom. After the 1976 military crackdown, he moved abroad and tried to mobilize support for the Montoneros in Latin America and Western Europe. [redacted] *Firmenich provided logistic support for the Nicaraguan Sandinistas during the insurgency that overthrew President Somoza.* [redacted] *he remains friendly with Sandinista leaders and in 1981 was involved in smuggling Cuban arms to El Salvador* [redacted]

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Press reports indicate that remnants of the ERP—probably no more than 100 persons—returned to Argentina in the wake of Alfonsin's election. As with the Montoneros, the group split into moderate and radical sectors. Unlike the Montoneros, however, the ERP appears to be fairly cohesive and well organized, with orders issued by exiled leaders in Managua, Nicaragua. 3.5(c)

These leaders—chief of whom is Enrique Gorriaran—evidently believe that the moment is not ripe for the resumption of armed struggle in Argentina. exiled ERP chiefs have justified their failure to return home by alleging that Alfonsin wants to arrest them to complement the Montoneros already imprisoned. Gorriaran pledged at a press conference in Managua earlier this year that, for the time being, ERP members in Argentina will use violence only in self-defense. 3.5(c)

the ERP is seeking to expand its political base by infiltrating the small but influential far left Intransigent Party (PI). The ERP has chosen the PI because the two groups are ideologically compatible and, because the ERP wants to avoid competing with Montonero penetration of the Peronists. The ERP has also been active in a handful of leftist labor unions and some of Argentina's human rights organizations. Its overall success in these efforts is unclear, but penetration of the Intransigents has been extensive and that many ERP members hold important PI leadership posts. 3.3(b)(1)

We share the judgment that the ERP's long-term goal is to return to armed struggle. In the meantime, however, the group's more moderate sector has effectively reigned in unruly elements who want to initiate violence immediately exiled leaders recently denied permission for an ERP cell to recover an arms cache in Argentina dating from the late 1970s. While reassuring as to the movement's short-term intentions, this may indicate that the ERP has at least a rudimentary capability to undertake terrorism if and when it abandons its current policy of relying solely on political infiltration. 3.5(c)

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ERP-Montonero Contacts

One of the more disquieting developments is a trend toward ERP-Montonero cooperation; the two movements recently have set aside longstanding ideological disputes and have begun to work together. An ERP-Montonero meeting was held in Cordoba Province in April 1984, according to press reports, and 3.3(b)(1)

the two groups have agreed to cooperate in order to infiltrate labor unions. The political organizations with which the Montoneros and the ERP are linked have also been moving closer together: 3.3(b)(1)

the IMP and the PI are trying to coordinate efforts to politicize and manipulate several human rights groups 3.3(b)(1)

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Foreign Support

Although ERP-Montonero collaboration may ease logistic barriers—such as lack of sufficient weapons and funds—to a resumption of terrorism, in our view, the radical left would require considerable foreign support to mount a serious threat to Argentine democracy. At present, prospects for such aid are dim: 3.3(b)(1) 3.3(b)(1)

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- The PLO, which previously trained and funded the Montoneros, refused appeals for renewed aid in mid-1983, 3.3(b)(1)
- Mexican officials are terminating safehaven arrangements and government jobs they formerly provided for exiled Montoneros. 3.3(b)(1)
- The Cubans, according to a source with good access, want to ingratiate themselves with Alfonsin and will therefore use their considerable influence over the

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Montoneros to discourage terrorist acts. the ERP may be similarly constrained by the Cubans.

- Remaining ERP and Montonero contacts with the Sandinistas, Chilean MIR, and the remnants of the Uruguayan Tupamaros are highly unlikely to compensate for the lack of substantial Cuban and East Bloc backing. 3.5(c)

Outlook

We believe that the ERP and the Montoneros will concentrate on political activity over the medium term. Both groups recognize that, in the wake of the terrorist bloodletting and military repression of the 1970s, there is scant popular support in Argentina for political violence. And the Alfonsin government's arrest and prosecution of Montonero leaders has sent a clear message to the left that a return to terrorism will bring swift retribution. 3.5(c)

The Montoneros will not, in our view, succeed in wresting control of the Peronist movement from the center right. Senator Saadi and the IMP faction have recently suffered a series of setbacks and appear to be losing status within the party. At best, the Montoneros can hope to retain a voice on the Peronist left via the IMP or, if the movement splits, dominate a small independent radical Peronist faction. The ERP has slightly better prospects for expanding its political influence through the Intransigent Party. The PI did well in recent student elections, and polls show that it could become a vehicle for the expression of leftist discontent with Alfonsin. The party, however, lacks a national structure and following, and its radical ideology has historically precluded it from attracting more than 5 to 10 percent of the electorate. 3.5(c)

Although leaders of both the ERP and the Montoneros are likely to be preoccupied with political machinations over the coming months, violence by dissident elements of both organizations cannot be discounted. This is especially true in the case of the Montoneros, where discipline appears to be weakest. We believe that the Montoneros' radical fringe does have some capability to conduct kidnapings and assassinations. Such actions could be triggered by further arrests of terrorist leaders, a harsh verdict in the trial of Firmenich, or provocations by rightwing terrorists. But we also believe that, under present circumstances, isolated acts of leftist violence can be effectively contained by the security forces. 3.5(c)

Over the long run, however, there is a danger that the radical left could resume full-scale terrorism. Argentina's new democracy remains fragile and has not yet been fully tested. Severe and prolonged economic pressures, or a power vacuum stemming from the assassination or incapacitation of Alfonsin, could jeopardize political stability. Such a scenario would probably include militant labor unrest, widespread social disorder, and a growing disaffection with democratic institutions on both the right and the left. Under these conditions the ERP and the Montoneros might be tempted to take up arms once again. The press reports that rightwing terrorists are also reorganizing and were responsible for several recent bombings of leftist and government targets; further attacks could spur a response from the radical left. The consequences of such developments are uncertain, but the stage would then be set for escalating left-right violence, growing political polarization, and a possible reentry by the military into the political system. 3.5(c)

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